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Web UI Trends Present & Future

The Evolution of Flat Design

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Carrie Cousins has more than 10 years experience in the media industry, including design, editing, and writing for print and online publications. Carrie is also a sports fanatic and spends way too much time planning football and basketball trips and obsessing over stats.

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Krzysztof is a graphic designer at UXPin. He is also a typography enthusiast and a founder of the global Typeseeing Project. Since 2014, he has been an instructor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk, where he teaches his students about design theory and design software. In his free time, he enjoys playing and inventing board games. Follow me on Behance
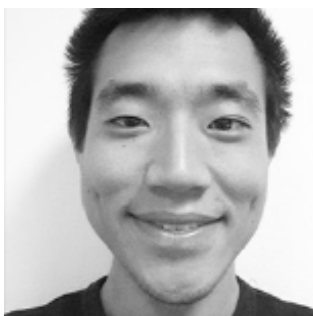
Jerry Cao is a content strategist at UXPin where he gets to put his overly active imagination to paper every day. In a past life, he developed content strategies for clients at Brafton and worked in traditional advertising at DDB San Francisco. In his spare time he enjoys playing electric guitar, watching foreign horror films, and expanding his knowledge of random facts.

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The Evolution of the Flat Design Revolution

Photo credits: Left image- iPhone iOS 6. Manesh Mohan. Creative Commons. Rotated and cropped from original. Right image- iPhone 6 Apps. Microservios Geek Crew. Creative Commons. Rotated and cropped from original.

One of the biggest trends of the 2010s is still evolving every day. Flat design, which really started to gain momentum in 2013 is still one of the most used – and talked about – techniques in web design.

How has it sustained for so long? What make it continue to draw in designers and developers to use it? The answer is that is that it is both simple and intuitive. It works with modern frameworks and interfaces and finally, because big players in the web design world have adopted it.

While flat design seemed to almost take the design community overnight, it has stuck around and evolved more slowly. Early showcases of flat design were incredibly flat with a desire to lose all of the skin of the previous skeumorphic era, but today's flat design is starting to include more touches of flair and ornamentation.

Enter "Almost Flat" or "Flat 2.0," as coined by Ryan Allen.

"Flat 2.0 is an evolution, not a revolution," Allen wrote. "Where flat design was a radical departure from the rampant skeuomorphism of days gone by, flat 2.0 is a playful branch off the flat tree. Flat design is the Christmas tree, Flat 2.0 is the ornaments and candy canes. And presents. No tinsel though, that stuff is a mess to clean up."

You can see the evolution in a number of other places as well. When Apple adopted flat design for its interfaces starting with iOS 7, the look was not quite as flat as one might have expected. Before the release, as flat design and minimalism were seeing a resurgence, many speculated about the "flatness" the interface would include. While it was nothing like the previous hardcore skeuomorphic iOS look, there were hints of shadows and other elements that were not considered completely flat, as you can see from the comparison above. That's where the "almost flat" idea originated.

Most of the flat design being created right now is more in that style. There are hints of shadows, colors that did not fit the rules of flat and typography choices that break the ideals of an entirely flat

design. This evolution is why flat design continues to stick with the web design community: it evolves well and into a number of different design patterns.
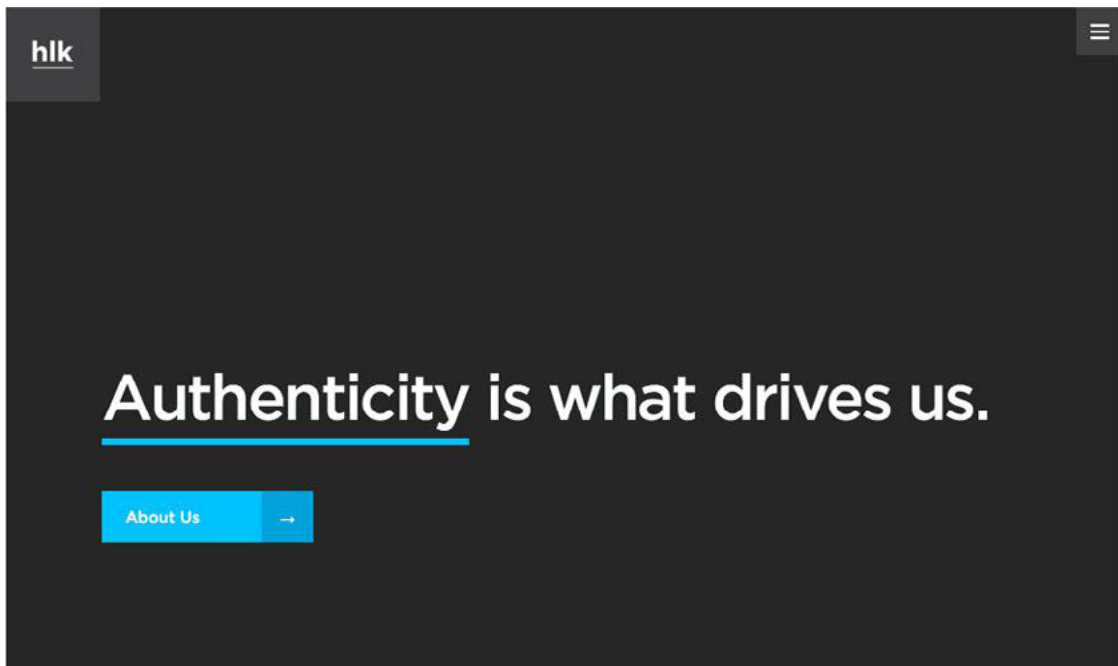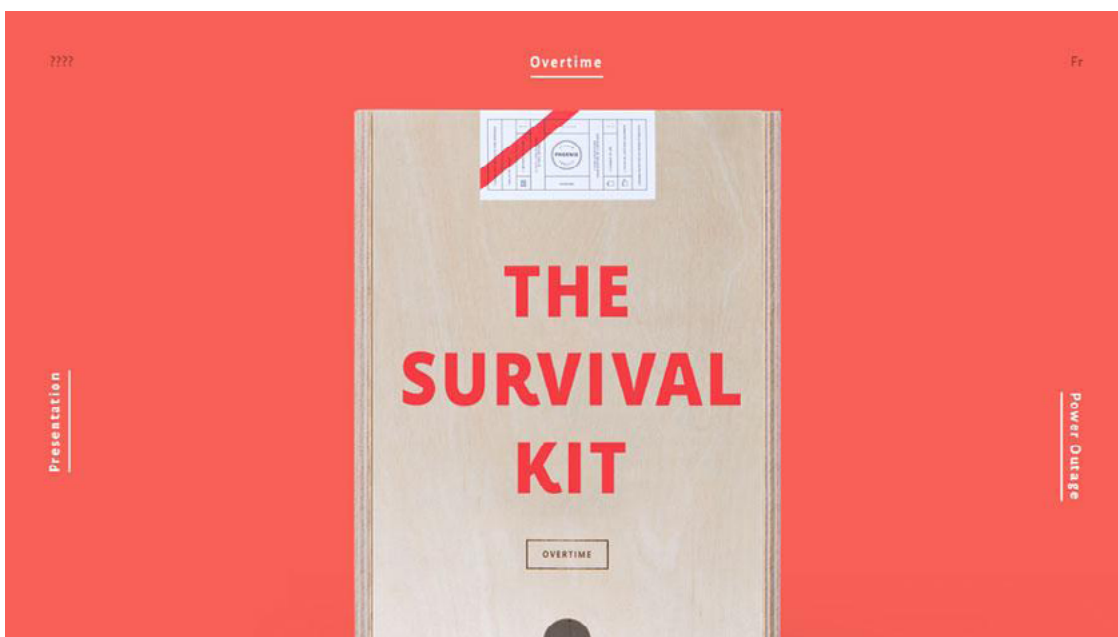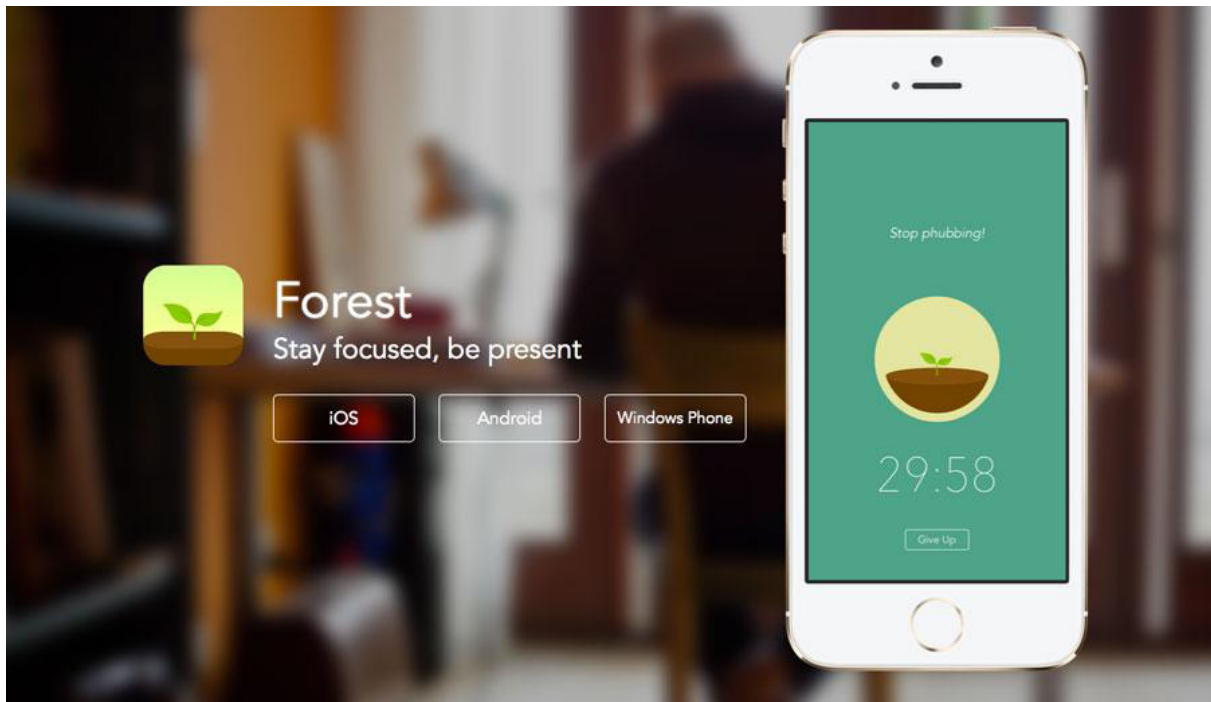

Photo credits: http://hlkagency.com/

Photo credits: http://agencysurvivalkit.com/

Photo credits: http://www.forestapp.cc/

You can almost see the evolution in the three examples above. The first (HLK Agency) is distinctly modular and clean. The second (Agency Survival Kit) includes small hints of shading, shadows, and even texture with its envelope image. The third (Forest App site) incorporates completely flat elements with fearless touches of realism (the background photo in particular).

Trends and Techniques Popularized by Flat Design

The roots of flat design can be traced to a number of different influences. From Swiss or international design to minimalism, flat design borrows techniques from a number of different styles.

Flat design has spurred some trends of its own as well. Icons with deep or long shadows, for example, came from the concept of flat design. The other thing flat design has done for the design community is bring back classic concepts to make them new again – minimalism is a great example of this practice.

Five techniques that have been tightly connected to flat design principles and ideals have emerged out of the trend as trends of their own.

1. **Long shadows**

   Most commonly used on smaller UI elements such as buttons, long shadows are created with a color tone that extends beyond a graphic illustration inside of a box.
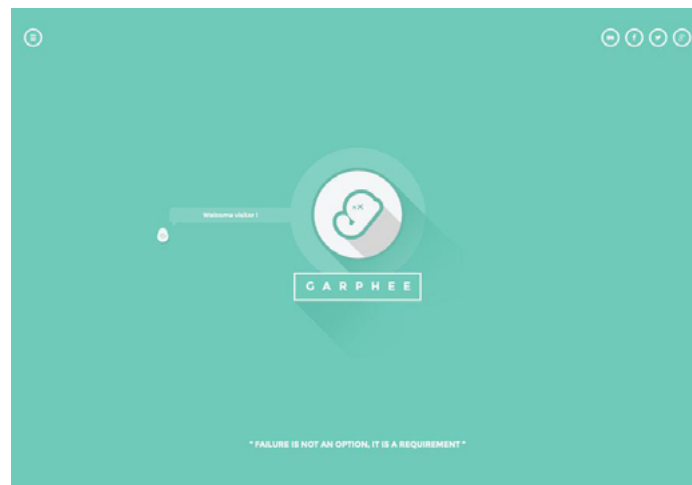

Photo credits: http://www.razvangarofeanu.com/#the-g

The shadow is often wide and positioned at a 45-degree angle with hard edges that are easy to identify. Applied in moderation, long shadows add depth and emphasis to otherwise flat elements.

However, as we'll explain later, this subtrend is starting to fade a bit in favor of subtler shadows.

2. Bright color palettes

One of the more fun things that has come from flat design is a re-emergence of color, specifically bright and bold color. Designers are using fun vibrant hues in more ways than ever before.
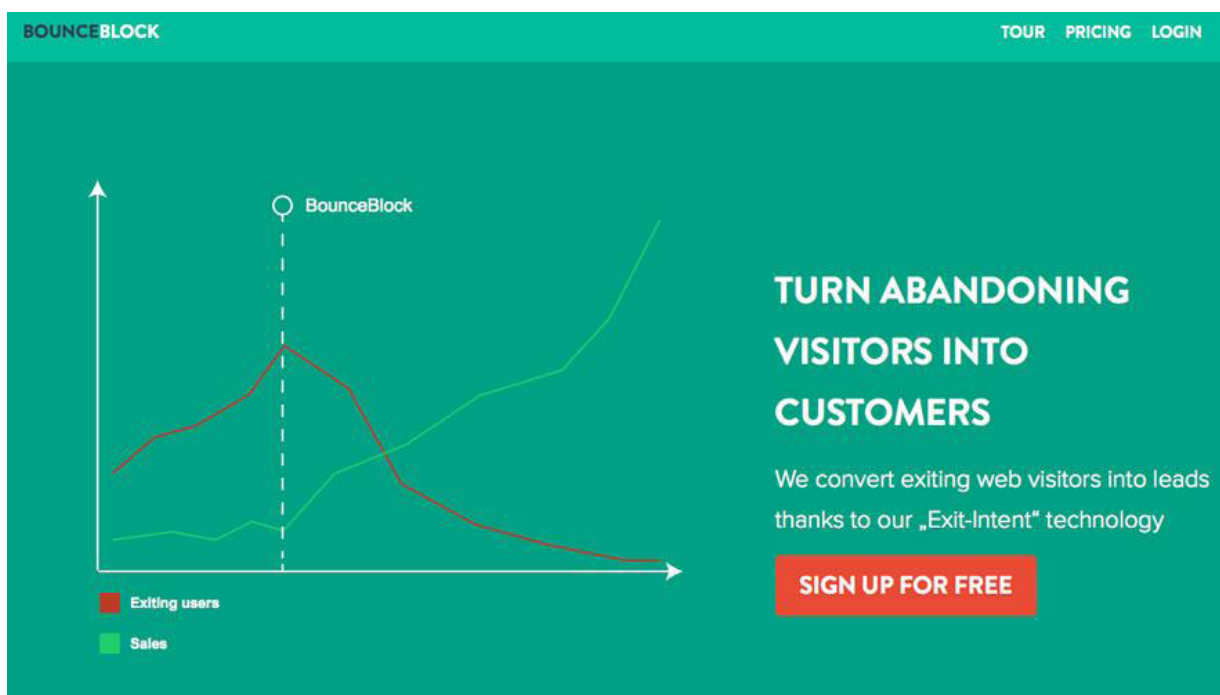

Photo credits: http://www.bounceblock.com/

In fact, some designers have even created a set of websites of their own devoted to these visual patterns.

3. Simple typography

Flat typography is not just the use of Helvetica.

Rather, it is the idea of a typeface that is simple and easy to read, which means commonly sans serif and contains a uniform stroke width. What's great about flat typography is that it really brought the focus on lettering back into the reading experience.

As described in *Web UI Design for the Human Eye*, typography is an artform in itself and the purpose for most designers is to create something that users can read. Flat typography encourages designers to think more carefully about any and all type selections, – in fact, even serif typefaces have evolved with simpler letterforms becoming the norm.
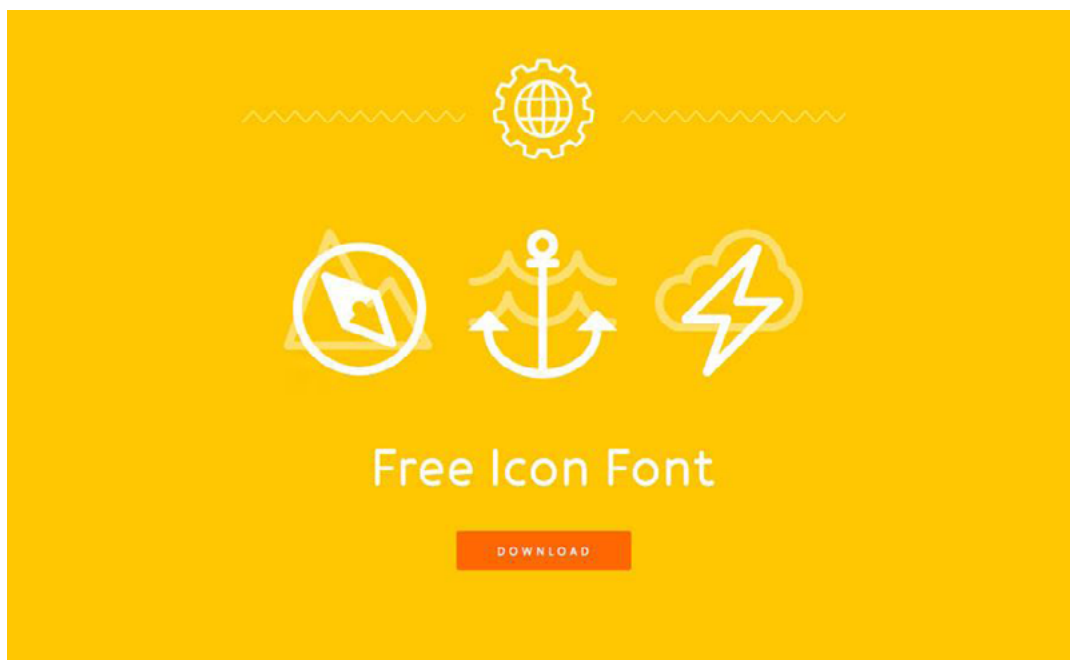

Photo credits: http://icon-works.com/

4. Ghost buttons

Designed as a transparent, yet clickable, element, ghost buttons provide a visual interaction cue without obstructing the UI design.
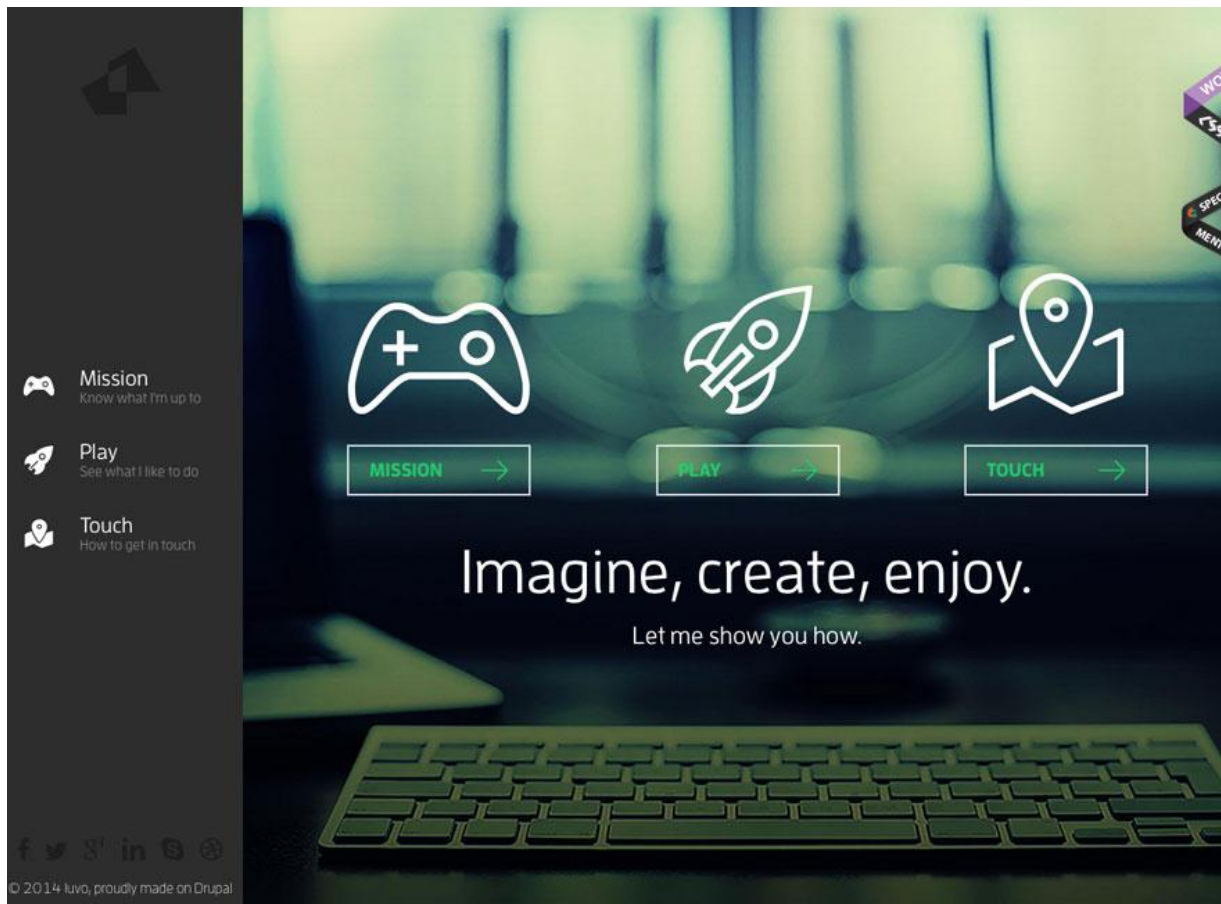

Photo credits: http://www.iuvo.si/

Because a ghost button is essentially an outline, and does not look like a button at all, it allows the background to still come into focus. The ghost button first emerged against design patterns with high-color backgrounds and has since evolved to work with images and a number of other elements. These simple buttons often include crisp typography that fits the flat aesthetic, which works particularly well in minimal design environments.

5. Minimalism

Flat design is innately minimal. After all, when the design isn't meant to resemble a real-life counterpart (e.g. a notebook app looking like a notebook), you strip away a lot of extraneous texture.

All that's left is the content framed by colors, gradients, shadows, shapes, and other visual subtleties. Flat design, in essence, forces designers to be more creative by saying less – designing from the content outward, instead of fitting the content inside of a photorealistic framework.
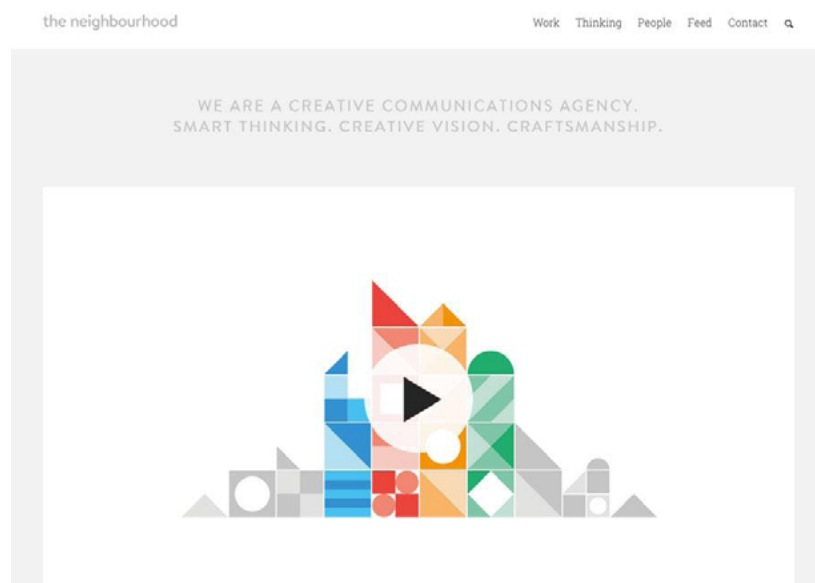

Photo credits: http://www.the-neighbourhood.com/

The concept of minimalism isn't new, but it's become extremely popular recently for its clean aesthetic and site performance benefits (such as reduction in page load times). This rebirth started with flat design and the use of a bright-colored background with a simple design and evolved into a more simple design surrounded by plenty of white space.

Flat Design Pros and Cons

Flat design and all of its evolving features come with pros and cons that UI designers could debate all day.

As with any UI design trend or technique, it's important to use flat design in a way that works with your concept and not against it. That's why the evolution and changes to the trend are so significant: designers are reimagining flat design in the ways that best suit the content.

Flat design started with the slate-like feel of early Windows Metro (as seen in their failed Zune player), but designers have realized that tasteful visual flourishes don't necessarily distract from content.

Let's look at a few pros and cons of present-day flat design:

Pros:
- The visually organized interface works well with responsive frameworks
- Minimalist, simple style is easy to browse for users
- Clean yet vibrant color palette is highly engaging
- Graphic icons are fun and easy to understand
- Bold lines and shapes express a logical, almost architectural feel
- Simple pieces and elements are quick to load
- Typography is designed for readability

Cons:

- Can be challenging to design well
- Some users may struggle with interfaces and what's clickable (the lack of texture sometimes weakens the signifiers and affordances which hint at function)
- Design can be "flat and boring"
- Many sites in this style can look similar
- Personality can be difficult to develop
- More difficult to pair well with complicated content because flat often lacks the distinct visual hierarchy necessary for large amounts or complicated content in context
- Style can lack visual hierarchy (considering limited range of textures)

The best approach to flat design, as with any design philosophy, is to focus less on the aesthetic and more on *why* you're designing. After all, every design philosophy and language is only a means to the end of helping users better accomplish their goals.
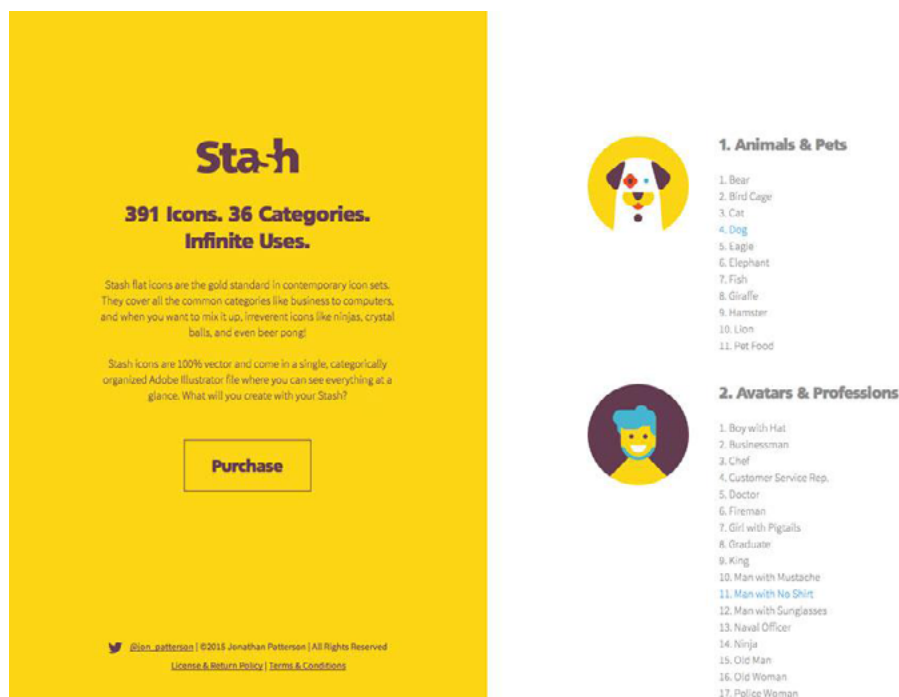
Flat Characteristics That Will Prevail

Flat design survives as a trend because it includes a number of elements with great universal appeal.

The "sweet spot" in the evolution of flat design is somewhere between the original trend and the skeumorphic ideals that were abandoned. The flat (or more appropriately almost flat) techniques that will endure are about two-thirds purely flat and one-third skeuomorphic.

1. Iconography

Flat design helped icons get the respect they deserve. Since the page is more stripped down, designers must really focus on perfecting the details of these often-small elements.

Photo credits: http://stashflaticons.com/

Now that users are becoming more accustomed to more intricate icons, expect them to hang around. Icons are also being used in ways that are larger and give them more focus as an art element and not just something for users to click on.

2. Typography

As described in Typography Trends Present & Future, the focus on beautiful typography, custom typefaces, and lettering with purpose continues to grow.

Photo credits: http://www.skewedicons.com/

With other trends such as hero headers, oversized typography or type-only websites, the influence of flat is easy to see in many of the type selections designers are making.

3. Minimal style

Minimalism might be one of the most over-used design catch-phrases of recent years.

But it certainly has it's merits: simple, easy-on-the-eyes designs are a top choice for landing pages because their style is captivating and usable.

Photo credits: http://www.micelistudios.com/

From a practical standpoint, minimal designs also adapt well to responsive breakpoints thanks to the sparsity of on-screen elements.

4. One design, one font

The use of single type families emerges as another branch from the simple typography ideas of flat design.

While type is simple and readable, this concept removes some of the focus from the design of lettering to the surrounding design and words themselves (logos, however, may be presented in a separate font to reflect the brand identity).
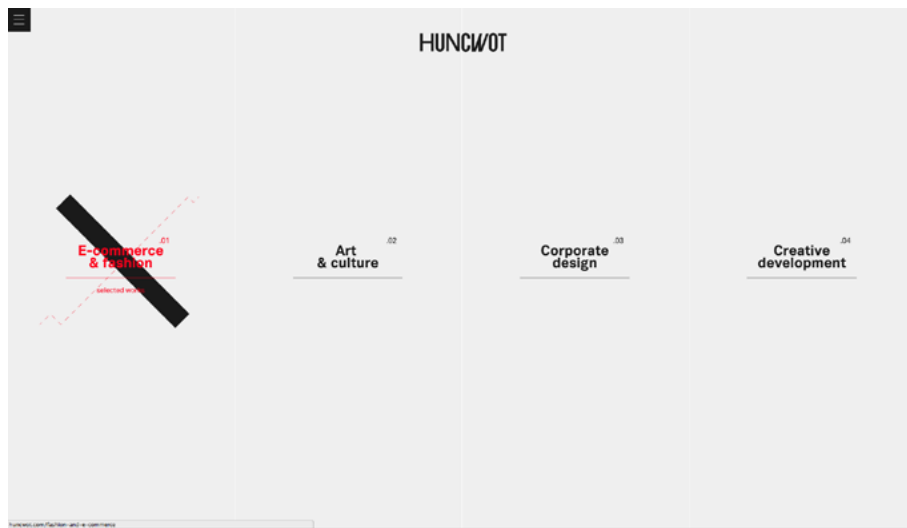
Photo credits: http://huncwot.com/ via awwwards

5. Color use

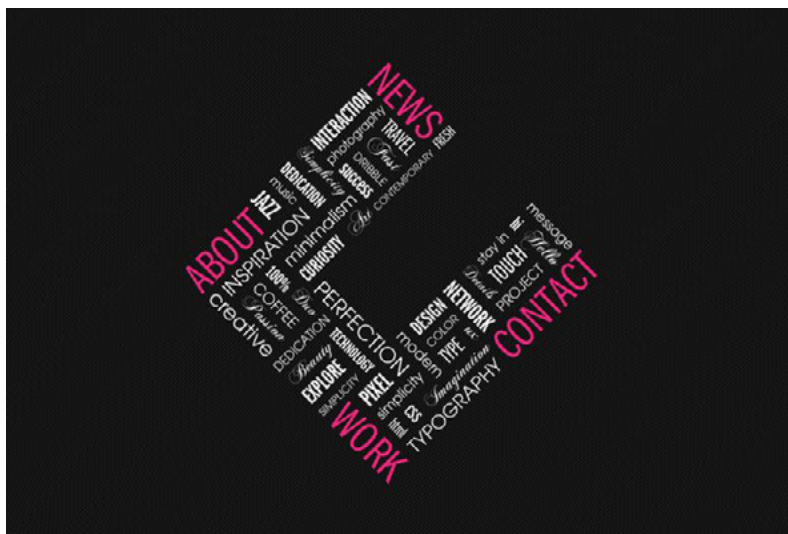Bright color is still popular, just applied differently.

Photo credits: http://wearec2.com/#/

Rather than filling a flat-style website with color, the preferred option has shifted to using color as an accent tool. As explained in *Interaction Design Best Practices*, this also pairs well with minimal concepts that include a lot of white space or sites that use large images as a focal point.

Flat Characteristics That Are Fading Away

Other elements of flat design are starting to burn out almost as quickly as they came into the limelight.

Most of these elements include fun design features but are difficult to employ in a user-friendly way. When done well, each of these techniques can result in a brilliantly designed and highly usable site, but more often these elements seemed to fall flat or felt overused and under-functional.

1. **Huge color palettes:** Flat design gave designers a new freedom and challenge in the allowance to use massive color palettes. Fun for a while, the end result was a little bit of color chaos, and most flat-style concepts are returning to traditional color palettes that contain only a handful of hues.

2. **Long shadows:** Fun for a while, long shadows are beginning to disappear almost as quickly as they became a trend. Designers are still using shadows, but are opting for a more subtler, softer aesthetic.

3. **Lack of emphasis:** One of the flaws of flat design is that it best worked on simple designs because of the lack of emphasis on any element over another. This problem has been realized and the "$^2/_3$ flat, $^1/_3$ skeuomoprhic" concepts are an effort at correcting this lack of visual hierarchy.

4. **Elimination of all design "tricks":** Flat purists have no room to talk about simple shadows or ornamentation of any kind. The majority of designers though are more flexible in using subtle design tricks – shadows, simple gradients and other hints of realism – to create visually distinct experiences.

5. **Super-thin typefaces**: Some of the early type in flat design outlines was actually difficult to read – in fact, there was an entire argument surrounding the choice of Helvetica Neue when Apple went flat. Super-thin or ultra-light typefaces are less popular, while medium-width strokes are more popular thanks to improved legibility and readability.

The Intersection of Flat and Material Design

So how does flat design mesh with the material design concepts that are emerging as a serious trend? The two are actually quite related.

Google's Material Design is rooted in three design virtues: visual cues should be grounded in reality, basic design theory prevails in visuals and all motion should have meaning. These ideas are quite similar to the ideas behind flat design with two major differences: greater focus on motion and animation and layering of design elements, making material design very much like Flat 2.0.
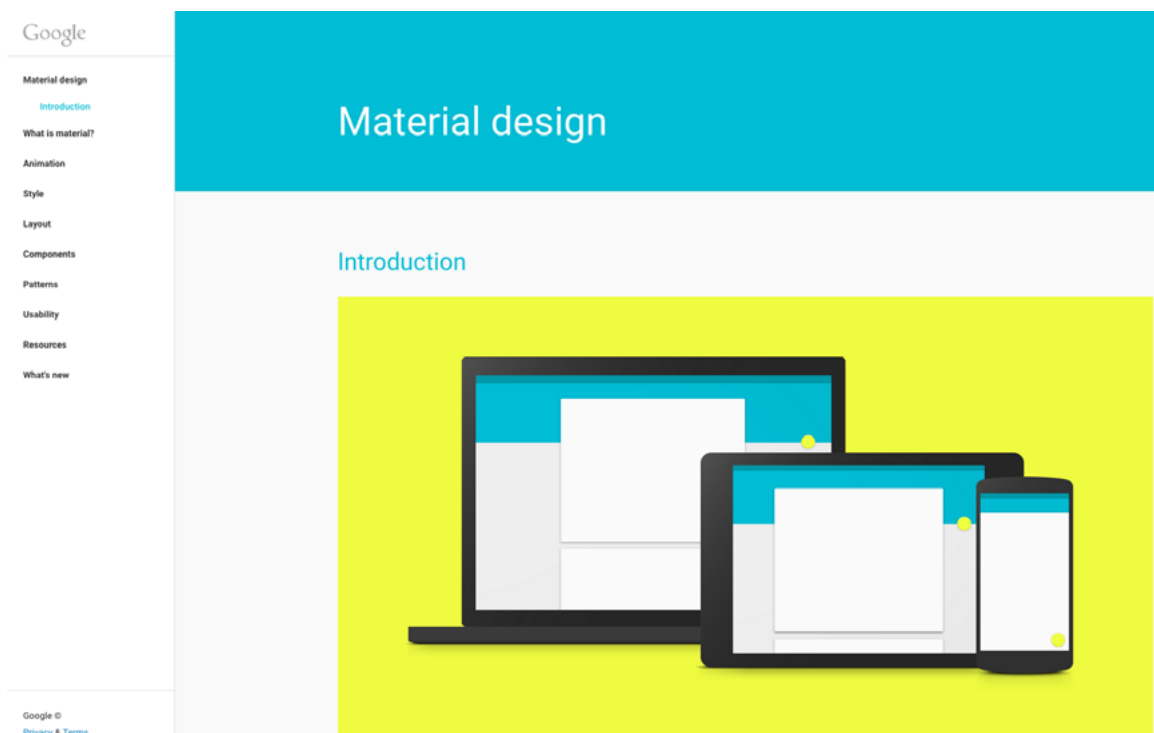

Photo credit: Google Material Design Principles

It's easy to argue that flat and material design are incredibly similar or vastly different (some of the roots lie in the Apple versus Android debate.)

What we do know is both concepts share similar visual traits – color, shapes and overall structure. Some of the difference (especially Material Design's paper-like layering) lies in the root of the concepts. Material design is documented and focused, while flat design has evolved almost onto itself. There's no doubt, however, that flat design certainly influences Material Design when you consider the bold images, crisp edges, and vibrant look and feel common to both methods.

Material design, if anything, takes a more practical stance than traditional flat design. By allowing for element layering along the Z-axis, it retains the visual maturity of flat design while being just skeuomorphic enough to communicate affordances to the user.

If you're interested in a free material design UI kit, check out our free Android Lollipop UI Kit which includes 45 elements for PSD & Sketch.

Thinking Beyond the Present

Where does flat go from here?

Early flat design concepts fit almost into a very distinct box that was clearly identifiable and lacked many characteristics of other trends or design concepts. But that's changing rapidly as designers are mixing flat concepts with other trendy interfaces and design languages.
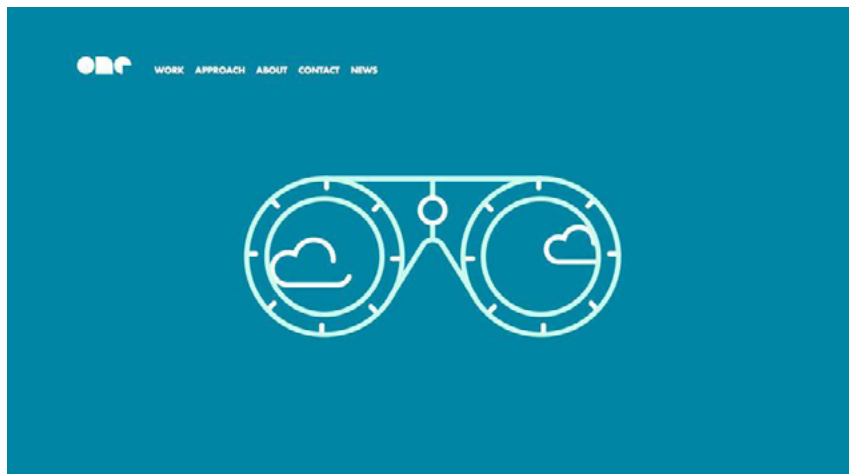

Photo credit: http://www.makershape.com/en/


Photo credit: http://onedesigncompany.com/

Some of the most beautiful examples of flat design work within the scope of websites that use parallax scrolling to help users navigate from idea to idea one "screen" at a time.

Canal TP does a great job of mixing concepts in an almost flat aesthetic that uses simple features such as type and color with animation and parallax scrolling. This mix of design tactics helps remove some of the over-simplicity out of flat design to make it more practical and usable for sites with more complex content.

http://www.canaltp.fr/
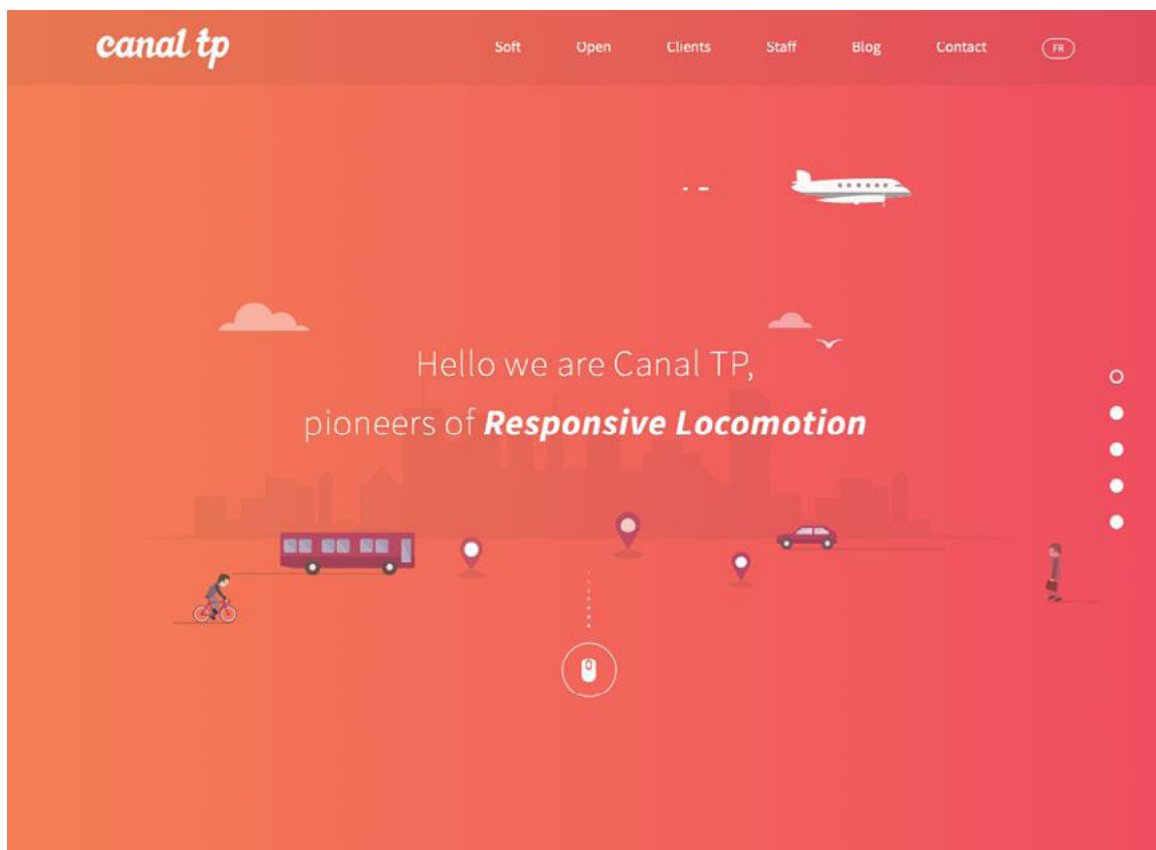
Flat design won't die, it will just become more advanced as new animations and interactions help it adapt to content-heavy sites. We know that content-first design is gaining traction (as it rightfully should), and flat design is the perfect canvas for its expression.
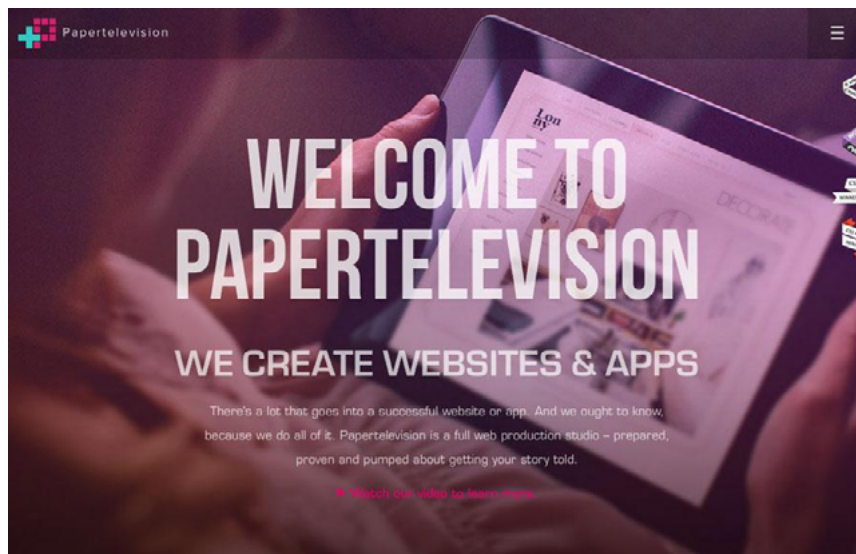
UI tools and elements are the strongest single element to come out of flat design. It's all about usability.

Every button, click or tap needs a purpose and a clear visual cue so that users will act (and interact) with a website. More importantly, UI tools and elements need an almost universal visual, so that a user knows what to do regardless of device or page. These minute design elements will become even more streamlined in look and feel as designers refine flat design's icon aesthetic.

Just look at the emergence of the hamburger icon for collapsible navigation - whether you agree with its use or not, there's no doubt that the simple set of lines now lives as a familiar symbol for across-the-board submenu interaction.

Flat and material design will rise in popularity together. It is near impossible to not pair flat design with what could become the guide-

book for interaction and usability standards, especially when you consider the traction gained by both design philosophies.

Flat will also continue to evolve to incorporate more images.

Many of the flat or almost flat sites hitting the web today include photos, something very few early flat sites featured. Flat-style colors and typography paired with great images reflect hints of a flat aesthetic that is comfortable with itself – it doesn't need to replace photos with clever icons purely for the sake of looking creatively modern.

For example, the almost flat style for Emiliano Barri, above, uses depth and images for the main visual in concert with flat elements,

navigation and typography. The result is a visual hybrid that is simple, modern, and very usable.

As designer Wells Riley suggests, remember to always look at your design through the lens of usefulness and usability. Aesthetics are just another tool in design, whose real purpose is solving user problems.

When you consider the spirit behind flat design (visual simplicity) and skeuomorphism (visual familiarity), you find that both concepts can certainly co-exist. The tricky part, as current years and the future will certainly prove, is finding the perfect balance between the two.

10 Free Resources and Tools

1. **Flat UI Colors:** All the hues and color codes you need to create a flat-style color palette.

2. **"The Ultimate Guide to Flat Design" from Webdesigner Depot:** This collection of UI kits, icons, tools, fonts, WordPress themes and more will help you create a web design with flat concepts in a snap.

3. **Flat Design 2.0**: See if you can spot the subtle differences between a design that is purely flat and one of the more evolved flat patterns. Then think about each style and which one you use more often.

4. **Flat Design Website Inspiration from Awwwards**: New sites are being added daily using flat design concepts; the gallery shows the emergence of almost flat as well.

5. **Flat UI Typography:** A fun combination of typefaces and usage to help you see how a font will look before using it in a flat design scheme. (Phrases in the examples are cards from the UX Drinking Game.)

6. **Google Material Design Guide**: Get the ins and outs of the concept and design language that the web giant is implementing across its brands in Google's "living document."

7. **"The History of Flat Design: How Efficiency and Minimalism Turned the Digital World Flat" by The Next Web**: Concepts of the design aesthetic have fairly deep roots that go beyond website design.

8. **Create a Long Shadow Tutorial**: There's no need to buy an icon pack; most designers can build a long shadow icon in just a few minutes using these tips.

9. **50 Flat Icon Sets**: Whether you download the sets for use or just inspiration, Digital Synopsis created a roundup of 50 sets that are free to use or peruse.

10. **25 Flat Device Mockups**: Flat can be fun to use in other ways to, these mockups are a nice way to showcase an app or site design with an unexpected design flair.
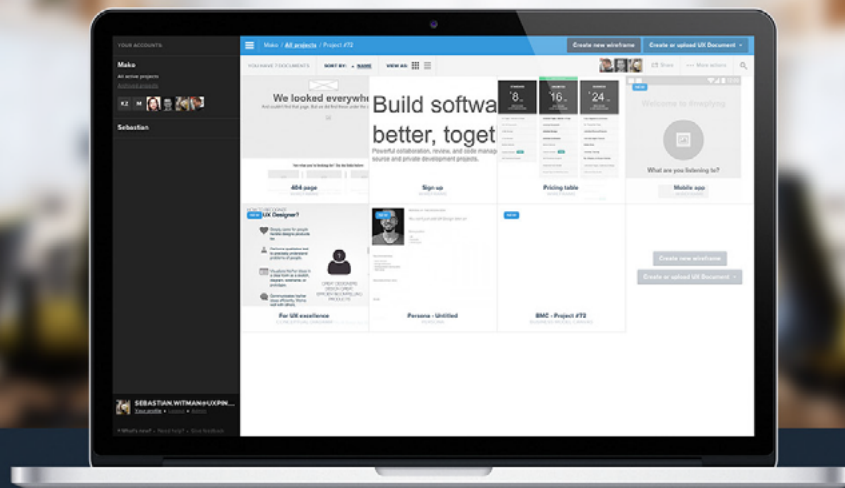
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✔ Collaboration and feedback for any team size

✔ Lo-fi to hi-fi design in a single tool

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